

Module B: TS Eliot

Rubric

Students explore the ideas expressed in the poems and develop an informed personal understanding through critical analysis and evaluation of the text's language, content and construction. Students will develop an appreciation of the textual integrity of their prescribed text. They research others' perspectives of the text and test these against their own understanding and interpretations of the text. They explore how context influences their own and others' responses to the text and how the text has been received and valued.

What is textual integrity?

The unity of a text- if we are to examine features that contribute to textual integrity then we will be examining features that give it a sense of unity. Features such as genre, form, structure, motifs, images, characters, events, content and language work cohesively together to create a text of value. The syllabus then says that "They extrapolate from this study of a particular text to **explore questions of textual integrity and significance.**"

Examination rubric

In your answer you will be assessed on how well you:

- demonstrate an informed understanding of the **ideas** expressed in the text
- evaluate the **text's language, content and construction**
- organise, develop and express ideas using language appropriate to audience, purpose and form

Informed response

- The most important feature of this module that markers want to see in your HSC response is a **PERSONAL** understanding of the poems.
- Informed by studying the poems and critical readings.
- The focus is on what you understand and the meaning you gain from the poetry.
- It is critical that each of Eliot's poems is studied in depth. All **five** of the poems are the **set text** for study and considered a suite of poems. Any or all of the poems they wish you to write on during the examination.

Essential aspects

1. A close and critical analysis of the poetry:
 - a. What is being said: content and ideas – well-chosen textual evidence
 - b. Why it is being said: context and purpose
 - c. How it is being said: form (free verse, stream of consciousness, voice of a persona), structure (stanzas, line lengths, syntax, rhythm and rhyme) and language (images – motifs, poetic devices and word choice)
2. A personal engagement with the key ideas informed by other critical perspectives: must comment on the critics' comments – do not simply quote a critic.



3. How and why the poetry has integrity and continues to be valued: the form, language, structure, content and ideas working cohesively to create quality literature that is memorable.
4. A holistic understanding of the poetry and how they are connected. When referring closely to two poems ensure that you make references to Eliot's other poems.

TS Eliot

His poetry asks the reader:

- 'Do I dare?'
- Do I have the courage to question, challenge and take action?

He believed that in an uncertain world where we are plagued by self-doubt and insecurity, faith provides us with some comfort.

- Late 19th century and 20th century technological and industrial changes, and WWI. The sprawling, polluted and over-crowded cities posed an existential threat to human life.
- Influenced by a childhood of living in the area of the expanding city of St. Louis that bordered on slums - the urban squalor and emptiness is evident.
- Loss of individualism, relaxed moral standards and isolation were feared outcomes of urbanisation and the escalation of the population.
- Eliot's poetry deals with problems associated with modern life, including feelings and experiences of alienation, doubt, loneliness and quiet personal despair, the disorder, the futility, the meaninglessness, the mystery of life and suffering
- Bemoaned the loss of spirituality humanity.
- Praised and loathed by critics T.S. Eliot felt the ongoing historical transformations, self-perpetuated by the resultant emphasis on progress, threatened to uproot and destroy England's literary tradition. So he took it on himself to save that tradition.
- Symbolist metaphysic: metaphorical and suggestive manner, giving images or objects symbolic meaning
- *"I see the path of progress for modern man in his occupation with his own self, with his inner being"*
- Anglican with a 'Catholic cast of mind' and a 'Calvinistic heritage and a Puritanical temperament'



Perspective

- Two dominant philosophies are evident: Psychoanalysis and Existentialism. Eliot laments the loss of chance, questioning and the prevalence of indecision and inaction.
- Eliot is lamenting the absence of faith and spirituality in the modern world. His search for meaning and a renewed sense of spirituality is evident in 'The Hollow Men'. He conveys a sense of anguish, arising from modern man's spiritual barrenness.
- Spiritual vacuity, entropy, despair and hopelessness are pervasive. In Eliot's essay on 'Baudelaire' he stated *'It is better in a paradoxical way to do evil than to do nothing at least, we exist.'*
- Humanity can become a victim of inaction, isolation and sterility but there is still hope.

- Humanity has a choice: through free will, action and faith man may still attain his liberation and redeem himself.
- *'The contemplation of the horrid or sordid or disgusting, by an artist, is the necessary and negative aspect of the impulse toward the pursuit of beauty. But not all succeed as did Dante in expressing the complete scale from negative to positive. The negative is the more importunate'* (Eliot's *The Sacred Wood*, p. 153).

Form

'the birth of meaning ... takes place in a manner both creative and ancient. Poetry cannot report the event; it must be the event, lived through in a form that can speak about itself while remaining wholly itself. This is a feat at least as difficult as it sounds, and if the poem succeeds in it, it is because, however much it remembers previous deaths by drowning, it creates its own life against its own thrust of questioning' (Eliot).

- The feeling of disbelief, of uncertainty resulted in growing interiorisation of the writing
- The poetry often makes a direct second-person appeal to the reader, eliciting a stark recognition of shared aspects of ordinary human existence.
- Stream of consciousness lays bare the workings of the mind. The donning of a persona performs a dual function. It enables the poet to transmute the personal, and the private into the universal. It also lends an authentic dramatic mode to his lyric impulse while integrating *'the man who suffers and the mind which creates'* (Eliot).
- *'What happens is that he achieves a kind of filigree without pattern'* (Aiken).
- *'The moments of greatest intensity have, as Eliot presents them, a certain obliqueness, an allusiveness, a controlling detachment...Eliot's meditations are meditations on experience, in which the abstractions belong as much as the images; they are all a part of his particular cast of mind, the meaning he gives to past experience'* (Alvarez).
- Unger compares Eliot's poetry to a series of slides. *'Each slide is an isolated, fragmentary image, producing its own effect, including suggestions of some larger action or situation of which it is but an arrested moment.'* <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/t-s-eliot>

Style

- Eliot's seemingly incongruous imagery deliberately disconcerts the reader.
- The incongruous juxtapositions establish innovative relationships between words, forcing the reader to re-examine preconceptions and values.

Key influences

'No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead.' Eliot's *'Tradition and the Individual Talent'*.

- Dante: Eliot believed that Dante's language was 'perfection'. Thus, when Eliot wanted to write with an economy of words and a verbal beauty and elegance he used Dante's works as inspiration. He loved Dante's *"clear visual images and concise and luminous language"*.
- Metaphysical Poets: Donne
- Shakespeare: Especially *Hamlet*

- The French symbolists
- Modernist—Ezra Pound (opposed to Romantic softness)
- Baudelaire and French poet—Jules LaForgue: Irony, symbolism:
*O if, after morning Mass,
 We could but vanish and be no more
 – Being sick of the human race,
 So well-contented, so crass,
 There, at the church-door*

Modernism

- The most striking feature of Modern literature is the overwhelming preoccupation with the inner self, the nature of consciousness, and the process of perception.
- As the Cubist painters shattered the features of a human face and reassembled them, perhaps with both eyes on one side of a profile, so Modernist writers shattered and reassembled the elements of their art.
- Modernists recognised that reality was subjective, and strove to represent human psychology.
- Stream of consciousness was a prevalent form with its representation of the raw, unprocessed human psyche of interest to Freudian analysis.

Key ideas

- Humanity without any vision and purpose in life
- Lack of meaningful communication in the modern world with the self and others has led to a loss of purpose and identity
- Conformity evident in meaningless social affectations and mindless routines that alienate those entrapped by social rituals and materialism.
- Humanity becomes so caught up in work presenting a persona to the world that they lose their individuality and authenticity.
- Lack of meaningful communication in the modern world.
- The tension between self-deprecation that can become paralysing and the importance of introspection.
- We can cope with the mediocrity of our lives and insecurities if we have faith in ourselves and God.
- Spiritual vacuity: Eliot's poetry maps the mental, spiritual and moral landscapes of his personas.

'Then how should I begin

To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?' – Prufrock

'And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker,

And in short, I was afraid.' – Prufrock

'The worlds revolve like ancient women

Gathering fuel in vacant lots.' – 'Preludes'

'We are the hollow men

We are the stuffed men

Leaning together

Headpiece filled with straw.' - 'The Hollow Men'

Module B Essays

Exercise 1

Essay 1 - the complexity of individual identity

Complexity comes from the challenges an individual faces to find, understand and accept the self – the ontological journey to self-knowledge and a meaningful existence is challenging and complex.

- Introduction:** Why and how Eliot conveys its complexity through his suite of poetry.
- Para 2:** Eliot’s view of why the journey to self-knowledge and a meaningful existence is challenging and complex in his modern world and how he employs form of free verse through the stream of consciousness to capture and convey the existential angst. Refer to his reaction to the modernist world to frame his poetry.
- Paras 3-?:** Prufrock – link to quote included in question. Refer to how Eliot reveals his paradoxical thoughts that reveal his uncertainty, neurosis, attitudes to others (such as being critical of shallow and trite social conversations) and self-doubt. Include brief links to context – can be quotes from Eliot. Link across to one or more other poems; especially the second poem you are examining. Analyse HOW that structure and language conveys the ideas connected to the question. Include a critic’s comment or two and how this comment/s has deepened or challenged your understanding.
- Paras:** Move to next poem and why the journey to finding the self is complex. Link to Prufrock and follow same pattern.
- Paras:** The consequences or ramifications for Prufrock and humanity – procrastination and social paralysis leading to the failure to connect meaningfully with others and live a meaningful existence.
- Paras:** As above for poem 2 – similar pattern. Analyse HOW that structure and language conveys this.

Essay 2 – Tension between individual and society

- Introduction:** Why and how Eliot conveys the tension through his suite of poetry. The source of the tension is the individual’s insecurities, values and attitudes that can cause alienation in a modernist world.
- Para 2:** Eliot’s view of the modernist period and how contextual issues have created this tension. Refer to how and why the form of his poetry that reveals the inner angst of the persona is an ideal vehicle to convey the tension.
- Para 3 - ?:** First and second poems and what creates the tension, and how Eliot reveals this through structure and language. Include brief links to context – can be quotes from Eliot. You could refer to factors such as the inability to connect with the self that is plagued by uncertainty renders an individual incapable of making meaningful connections with society. This is evident in Prufrock and Rhapsody. Link across to one or more other poems. Include a critic’s comment or two and how this comment/s has deepened or challenged your understanding.
- Paras:** Discuss why and how different attitudes and values can lead to tension, such as on the ‘Journey of the Magi’ when the magus is no longer able to accept his old faith and view of the world creating alienation or in Prufrock when he is critical of the shallowness of others.

Exercise 2

1. *‘Like the poets of the imagism movement, Eliot greatly emphasised the importance of precise and clear imagery. He saw the poetic medium as much more significant than the personality of the poet.’* Evaluate how the imagery and the poetic medium have been used to convey the sense of alienation and uncertainty in at least two of Eliot’s poems.

2. 'The emergence of a hectic city life coupled with the sense of human decay led poets such as Eliot to use their literature as a means of exposing the despair and self-doubt of individuals residing in a fragmented world through the stream of consciousness that reflected the raw, unprocessed human psyche.' To what extent does this statement reflect Eliot's representation of the dilemma of creating an authentic self for the individual in the modern world? Refer to at least two poems.

3. RA Scott-James stated that Eliot *'brought into poetry something which in this generation was needed: a language spare, sinewy, modern; a fresh and springy metrical form; thought that was adult; and an imagination aware of what is bewildering and terrifying in modern life and in all life. He has done more than any other English poet to make this age conscious of itself, and, in being conscious, apprehensive.'* How has Eliot used form and language in his poetry to focus on the importance of being conscious?

Exercise 3

Evaluate the quality of the following introductions and provide further suggestions as to how to improve them:

1. *Explorations of individuals seeking ontological understanding hampered by insecurity, uncertainty and fears of alienation dominate Eliot's poetry to communicate how urbanised societies have prevented meaningful connections and have consequentially fostered the inability to take action. Through his suite of poetry, the developing sense of alienation has been solidified through the attention to the incongruent form and enigmatic choice of language whereby Eliot communicates his perspectives concerning how the modern context limits the individual's pursuit for meaning. Shifting from an individual alienation in the Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock to a collective alienation in Hollow Men, Eliot decries the repercussions of urbanisation by creating a setting whereby nobody has faith or courage and are void of any intellectual or spiritual thought, thereby provoking society to react.*
2. *Eliot's suite of poetry perpetuates the timeless complexity of the human condition in finding existential authenticity and meaning in a fragmented modernist epoch of 'the horrid or sordid or disgusting'. His metafictional poetry reflects his ontological journey, as an 'escape for emotion' and the 'occupation with his own self, with his inner being'. 'The Love song of J. Alfred Prufrock' explores the negative consequences of stasis and inaction instigated by self-abrogation that creates an unsettling tension with society, unable to answer the 'overwhelming question'. This negativity and the challenging search for meaning is explored further in 'Preludes', inculcating the need for faith rather than spiritual vacillation to avoid being 'hollow', the 'religious arabesque of the modern man in ascending spirituality' (Maleki). This arduous journey towards self-actualization is captured in 'The Journey of the Magi', Elliot's antithesis of taking action and finding faith to only further the complexity of finding meaning in life with 'the last twist of the knife'. Lamenting the constant need for existential questioning of 'do I dare' and 'how should I presume' in the 'dynamism of asking questions and of learning not to reply' (Irving) as the closest the individual can get to finding identity.*

Essay questions

- Explore how time and place are used in Eliot's poetry to shape the reader's understanding of man's isolation. In your response, make detailed reference to at least TWO of the poems set for study.
- "Through its portrayal of human experience, Eliot's poetry reinforces the value of the individual". To what extent does your interpretation of at least TWO of Eliot's poems support this view?
- Evaluate the effectiveness of Eliot's exploration of the relationship between individuals and their world within his poetry. In your response discuss 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' and one other poem set for study.
- "Despite differing responses to texts over time, ultimately it is the structure and features of a text that is most significant in evaluating its success".
- Explore the effectiveness of the poetic style of T. S. Eliot's when evaluating his success as a poet. Refer to at least TWO of the prescribed poems set for study.
- How is your personal response to the poetry of TS Eliot shaped by a perception of the individual in the poems? In your answer, refer to THREE of the poems set for study.
- Compose an argument for or against the topic: 'That every text has its use-by date.' Consider your prescribed text's ideas, language and form, and its reception in different contexts.

- A valuable text has something to say and says it well. How valid is this claim, considering the different contexts in which a text can be received? In your response compare your evaluation of Eliot's poetry with one other perspective on his work. Base your discussion on close analysis of at least TWO poems.
- "A text has value if it creates opportunities for change, while maintaining its core values." Explore this notion in relation to your text set for study.
- A key aspect of the poetry's ongoing appeal is Eliot's rejection of structure. In your view, to what extent does the lack of structure contribute to the appeal of Eliot's poetry? Support your evaluation with detailed reference to at least TWO of the poems prescribed for study.
- How has considering other interpretations of Eliot's poetry helped you develop your own appreciation of the textual integrity of the poetry? In your response you should consider the ideas, poetic techniques and structure of at least TWO poems prescribed for study.
- Tension between individuals and life experiences create interest in the poetry of TS Eliot. Discuss in reference to two poems.

Interesting Perspectives of Eliot's Poetry

'For every man who thinks and lives by thought must have his own scepticism, that which stops at the question, that which ends in denial, or that which leads to faith and which is somehow integrated into the faith which transcends it'
(T.S. Eliot, "The Pensees of Pascal").

'Poetry...makes us...a little more aware of the deeper, unnamed feelings which form the substratum of our being, to which we rarely penetrate; for our lives are mostly a constant evasion of ourselves, and an evasion of the visible and sensible world' (Eliot, 1975).

In the critical essay you have the choice of using the critical perspectives of others inform your own understanding of Eliot's poetry. You need to ensure that if you use these perspectives that you observe the following:

- Do not simply quote the critic and then move on. State how their perspective has challenged or deepened your understanding of Eliot and his poetry or a specific poem.
- Use short quotes if you are directly referring to their perspective. For example the highlighted phrases could be used instead of a lengthy quote or you could paraphrase the critic to convey their overarching idea.

Kathleen O'Dwyer (2012) 'A Poetic Perspective on Subjectivity'

1. *'The poetry of T.S. Eliot grapples with the apparent absence of meaning in modern life; it exposes the personal and social fragmentation and disenchantment often masked by assumed conventions in behaviour, communication, and relationships; and it explores the diverse impediments to authenticity and integrity in the private and public expression of experience. In form and content, Eliot's poetry launched a uniquely original and unfamiliar interpretation and portrayal of modern reality. The personal voice, the Wordsworthian 'I' of romantic poetry, was replaced by a diversity of voices and personas, reflecting the absence of a unified, harmonious self; the beauty of the pastoral landscape was foreshadowed by the drab, disparate, sprawling sterility of urban development, and the pleasurable sound effects of familiar rhythm and structural constancy gave way to an unpredictable multiplicity of contrasting styles and a reversal of traditional associations of sequence and destination.'*
2. (His poetry wrestles) *'with the uncharted territory of social and individual disenchantment and dissolution, the eclipse of personal and collective meaning and purpose, and the alienation of the subject from previously assumed sources of direction and support.'*

3. *'While Eliot's poetry strips away comforting illusions and traditional conceptions of life and the human subject, to lay bare the realities of desolation, suffering and loneliness, it nevertheless attempts, in the penetration of these experiences, to discover a power which endures and surpasses pain, and which states against all the odds that 'All shall be well and / All manner of things shall be well' (Eliot, 2004: 198).*

RA Scott-James (1932 2nd October), Sunday Times

(Eliot) 'brought into poetry something which in this generation was needed: a language spare, sinewy, modern; a fresh and springy metrical form; thought that was adult; and an imagination aware of what is bewildering and terrifying in modern life and in all life. He has done more than any other English poet to make this age conscious of itself, and, in being conscious, apprehensive.'

Peter Ackroyd (2011) TS Eliot,

'Eliot was aware of what he called 'the void' in all human affairs—the disorder, meaninglessness, and futility which he found in his own experiences; it was inexplicable intellectually.... which could only be understood and endured by means of a larger faith'

Melissa Eiles (1933) "The Infirm Glory of the Positive Hour: Re-Conversion in 'Ash Wednesday'"

'The essence of a religious conversion . . . in Eliot's poetry is change--almost torturous intellectual and spiritual growth that pushes the soul into a conflict between its old life of sin and its new life of grace...it is the difference between animals and men. Without conversion, man risks loss of passion and hollowness--both in life on earth and in life after death.'

Prajna Pani (2013) 'Reflections on the Existential Philosophy in TS Eliot's Poetry'

'Eliot mourns the loss of chance, sobbing in existentialist despair, lamenting of passive indecision and inaction.'

John Cooper (2006) Introduction to Eliot

'The need to invent personas and masks is tempered by the horror of how others might see us or might see past our facades, whether in judgment or sympathy, and, for Eliot, sympathy was the greater horror, even more than that of being judged. On one side of this divide lies abjection, abasement, humiliation; on the other, damnation. Eliot gave the name of J. Alfred Prufrock to this condition.'

